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ABSTRACT

Saint Petersburg College (SPC) (Florida) has begun to enroll students in bachelor's degree programs in education and technology management, and a B.S. program in nursing. This article presents critics' arguments against community colleges offering bachelor's degrees, suggesting that community college B.A.s are inferior degrees, and that offering degrees will alter the community college mission of equitable access to higher education. Proponents of the degree programs argue that the colleges are fulfilling a community need that has not been adequately addressed by four-year institutions. Florida ranks 47th in the nation, adjusted for population variation, in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded. SPC is in an area that is the state's most densely populated, and yet it is most underserved by B.A degree programs. Many students do not continue their education after the A.A. degree because financial, family, or job constraints do not allow them to commute or move to a university. More than 70% of SPC's students are women. Some argue that by offering bachelor's degrees closer to students' homes, women who would never have had the opportunity to go to college are now taking advantage of the opportunity. In addition, teaching and nursing shortages in Florida are critical; the community college degree could address this issue. (Author/NB)

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National CrossTalk - Winter 2003

Community College Baccalaureates

Some critics decry the trend as "mission creep"

By Kay Mills
St. Petersburg, Florida

From outside, the portable buildings on St. Petersburg College's Clearwater campus look like any others that house a new program awaiting construction of its permanent home. But inside these trailer-like buildings are state-of-the-art classrooms for the community college's venture into a baccalaureate degree program in technology management. At least seven community colleges across the country are now offering bachelor's degrees, fueling debate over how that expansion alters the mission of these schools.

Critics charge that such programs take community colleges away from doing what they do well and move them into an arena in which they will offer "second-class baccalaureates."

The St. Petersburg-Tampa area along the west coast of the Florida peninsula has many high-tech firms. College officials say these companies are seeking people who not only know computers and software but who also can move into management, who understand how to communicate and how to organize projects. To gain these skills, people who may be working full-time at "techie" jobs need a bachelor's degree. But many don't have the time to commute the highly congested 35 miles or more across the bridge from Clearwater or elsewhere in Pinellas County to the University of South Florida in Tampa. Others cannot afford the higher tuition or find that USF's schedule doesn't meet their needs.

Since last fall, they have been able to enroll in a bachelor's degree program at St. Petersburg College, as have registered nurses seeking a B.S. in nursing and people seeking degrees in elementary education, exceptional student education (also known as special education), and math and science education. Carl Kuttler, Jr., president of the college-previously St. Petersburg Junior College-sees these programs as a way to open access to four-year degrees and to meet shortages, especially of nurses and teachers.

Not everyone agrees with these moves by schools that were established to offer two-year, Associate of Arts degree programs or various training certificates. For these colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees is "a ridiculous waste of resources, and we don't

St. Petersburg College President Carl Kuttler, Jr. thinks the new degrees will help to relieve a statewide

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have that many resources," said James Wattenbarger, professor emeritus of education at the University of Florida. Such programs take community colleges away from doing what they do well and move them into an arena in which they will offer "second-class baccalaureates," he added.

Wattenbarger, who helped to develop the long-range plan for Florida community colleges, then was their state director from the mid-1950s to mid-1960s when they expanded from 4,000 to 300,000 students, feels that "personal ambition and political decisions" are the driving force behind the shift. The history of higher education is replete with examples of this mission creep, he said. "We started with small finishing schools, then two-year normal schools, then the normal schools became state teachers colleges, the state teachers colleges became state colleges and the state colleges became state universities."

Looking at the issue from the perspective of the Association of Community College Trustees, its president Ray Taylor said that "mission creep" really doesn't figure in their language. The purpose of these institutions and their boards is to serve the community, and whatever the community needs. "That's the mission" of the colleges, Taylor said. Nevertheless, he has misgivings about any wholesale move of community colleges into baccalaureate degrees.

"The concept of four-year degree programs is very seductive," he said, adding that academicians respect, "even revere," the status attributed to higher degrees, so community college officials may well be attracted to offering them. But governing boards must ask what the community needs and what its resources are. No one else gets up in the morning worrying about the things with which community colleges deal-everything from remedial courses to lifelong education and workforce development, Taylor said, adding that there are numerous other opportunities to bring four-year degrees to students.

George Boggs, president of the American Association of Community Colleges, considers this a "controversial issue" within the community college world. His organization includes members that give baccalaureate degrees and those that do not, and it has taken no position on the question. Part of the debate centers around doubts that university schools of education can meet the demand for more teachers in some areas of the country, Boggs said. Some states also have poor transfer policies between community colleges and universities, and some universities are reluctant to offer courses at convenient times for students or to offer applied baccalaureate degrees.

"If a community college is not successful in working with the university community to develop the kinds of agreements that allow students to enroll in baccalaureate programs, I think it is legitimate for the community college to offer degrees in those areas that are needed," said Boggs. "However," he added, "I urge caution on the part of community college leaders and encourage them to first try to develop transfer agreements."

Boggs wants to protect the mission of community colleges, which, as he sees it, centers on helping students in a variety of ways-with tutorial and remedial programs, smaller class sizes in the freshman and sophomore years than they might have at universities, and a focus on teaching rather than on research and publication. Community colleges are also willing to take risks and provide open access to people of all ages, ethnicities and levels of preparation. "I don't see those same values in other areas of higher education," Boggs said. "I'm afraid that if we start looking too much like them, we'll lose those values."

St. Petersburg's Kuttler said he has looked at every warning and has tried to turn it into a strength for his school's baccalaureate programs. For example, critics said the college would use its lower-division faculty for the new programs and that they would not be as good as university faculty. "First of all, teaching is our strong point," Kuttler said, adding that every faculty member hired for these four-year programs has a doctorate.

Critics also worried that giving its own baccalaureates would cut into programs St. Petersburg already offered with University of South Florida and 11 other area public and private colleges through the University Partnership Center at two SPC campuses. The center enrolls some 3,000 students. Kuttler said that he and the president of USF, Judy Genshaft, consult before St. Petersburg establishes new programs "so there are no dogfights." Besides, he added, "the teaching and nursing shortage is so bad, it wouldn't matter if there was a little competition."

Pinellas County, stretching from Tarpon Springs in the north to St. Petersburg in the south, and from the Gulf of Mexico to Tampa Bay, is the state's most densely populated area, and yet it is least served by baccalaureate degree programs, Kuttler said. "Who is getting hurt (by these new programs)?" he asked. "Seventy percent of our students are women." By offering bachelor's programs closer to their homes, Kuttler added, "we've provided women who would never have had a chance to get the degree that opportunity."

Thomas Furlong, a St. Petersburg College vice president, says new bachelor's degree programs will improve access to Florida higher education.

The county ranks fifth in the state in the number of people who receive associate's degrees, but "a whole lot of people just stay home" afterward, said Thomas Furlong, senior vice president for baccalaureate programs and university partnerships. Overall, Florida ranks 47th in the nation in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded, adjusted for population variation, according to a report done for the state and based on National Center for Education Statistics data.

Furlong believes that the SPC bachelor's degree programs further the state's goal of

increasing access to higher education as outlined in the master plan issued in February 1999 by the Florida Postsecondary Education Planning Commission. To create greater access, Furlong said, Florida is also increasing the number of college courses online, expanding the universities' branch campuses, and encouraging partnerships between universities and community colleges.

St. Petersburg College enrolled 62,465 students last year, with 31,928 taking courses toward associate's degrees in arts or science. It began its upper division programs in August 2002 with more than 450 students in the fall term-87 in education, 65 in nursing, and more than 300 in technology management. The school expects those enrollments to increase for the spring term and again next year as the new programs add a second class of students.

The technology management program is offered at SPC's Clearwater campus or online. It aims at expanding the horizons of its students, said Shri Goyal, dean of the program and former director of technology management at GTE laboratories in Waltham, Massachusetts. To move into middle management, students working in technology fields need to visualize projects, work in teams instead of in isolation, and learn to make clear presentations. In addition to technical and management courses, students also participate in seminars on topics that may include information security, disaster planning and recovery, and electronic marketing, Goyal said.

The new bachelor's degree program in nursing typically draws nurses seeking to enhance their opportunities for promotion, higher pay and leadership in the field, said Jean Wortock, dean of nursing. For others, it is a stepping stone to the master's degree, with which they would be qualified to teach nursing. Just as there is a shortage of nurses, she said, there will also be a need for instructors because nationwide many nursing faculty members, average age 55, will be retiring in the next decade.

Students take courses ranging from community health nursing theory and aging to professional roles and leadership theory. They are attracted to the courses at St. Petersburg's campus because they cost about $10 a credit less than at the University of South Florida. The majority of the bachelor's degree students received their associate in science degree from St. Petersburg, so there is also "a comfort level in returning to the campus from which you have your degree," Wortock added.

SPC's nursing program also offers classes for 28 nurses at Mease Countryside Hospital in Safety Harbor, near Tampa Bay. These students wanted to take courses toward bachelor's degrees at their workplace, the hospital. When they found the schedule that the college proposed was unworkable, the college quickly turned

Florida ranks 47th in the nation in the number of bachelor's degrees awarded, according to a report based on National Center for Education Statistics data.

that schedule around, Thomas Furlong said. "You can't do that if you're a large university."

St. Petersburg located its College of Education on its Tarpon Springs campus at the northern end of Pinellas County so that it could also serve students from Pasco and Hernando Counties farther north. Tina Clark, a junior majoring in exceptional student education, lives in New Port Richey in Pasco County. Her husband is in the Coast Guard and frequently is away, and she has a ten-year-old son, so she didn't have time to drive to the University of South Florida. Melissa Barrs, a junior majoring in elementary education from Dunedin, also lives closer to St. Petersburg's campus than to USF. "It's a small college that has that personalized touch," she said, adding that most of her classes have fewer than 20 students.

When the baccalaureate proposals surfaced, the St. Petersburg College faculty faced some "identity confusion," said Martha Campbell, faculty senate president from 1998 to 2001. "What are we? Are we a two-year or four-year institution?" Then there was some concern about pay differentials, "but not as much as you might have thought," said Campbell, who teaches in the communications department. The college advertised the new teaching positions as 12-month jobs, and most of the existing faculty works ten and a half months. "Many didn't want to teach 12 months, so that helped."

Junior Melissa Barrs, pursuing a four-year education degree, likes St. Petersburg College because of its "personalized touch."

The biggest question Campbell sees now is, "How do you assimilate the new faculty into the culture of the college?" By that, she said she was referring to concerns ranging from how decisions are made and who participates in making them to what kind of robes are worn at graduation.

In establishing its four-year programs, St. Petersburg College had a formidable ally-former State Senator Don Sullivan. A Republican who recently left the legislature because of term limits, Sullivan represented areas of Pinellas County and chaired the senate subcommittee handling education appropriations. The university system strenuously resisted the idea of allowing the community college to offer bachelor's degrees, Sullivan said, but "I had the ability to put a lot of pressure on because of the budget." Sullivan is now vice president for economic development and innovative projects at SPC.

The University of South Florida has a branch campus along Tampa Bay near downtown St. Petersburg, but Sullivan said it had not grown significantly in 20

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years. "That had become a community problem, at least that's what we argued." He proposed taking the branch away from USF and making it a stand-alone university.

Judy Genshaft, who had just arrived as USF president as this maneuvering was occurring, had worked earlier in her career with Ohio State's regional campuses. She strongly believed it was important, for academic and economic reasons, that the university keep its branch campuses. She said she kept her focus on that.

Swirling around in a brand new job, Genshaft said, "I could only do what I could do. Having community colleges offer baccalaureate degrees is a statewide issue. I wasn't going to start fighting on that front." USF kept its St. Petersburg campus, which received more autonomy, including its own budget. St. Petersburg College got its baccalaureate degrees, and Genshaft said that is working fine. Carl Kuttler's goal and hers are the same, she added-to have more people receive bachelor's degrees and become productive citizens.

The Florida legislature passed Sullivan's bill, which also dropped "junior" from St. Petersburg College's name, and Governor Jeb Bush signed it in 2001. The legislature also established a procedure for other schools to apply for programs deemed necessary in their areas.

"It's amazing to me that more community colleges have not stepped forward to take advantage of the opportunity to apply for granting four-year degrees," said Sullivan. He indicated that the colleges may not want to jeopardize any cooperative agreements they have with state universities.

Harold W. Heller, chief executive officer and vice president for the USF St. Petersburg campus from 1992 until last summer, is now professor of special education there. He pointed out that until a few years ago, "USF-St. Pete" offered only upper division courses and now is a four-year campus. "So we kind of moved into territory that [St. Petersburg College] had been sole owner of." St. Petersburg College in turn had long been concerned about better serving students in the north part of Pinellas County who were seeking baccalaureate degrees.

If the rationale for SPC offering baccalaureate degrees in education, for example, is need for the programs, Heller said, that could be justified for students who could not commute from the northern end of the county to USF or pay the higher USF tuition. But if the issue is capacity, "it already exists-we have plenty of capacity." The education program at USF St. Petersburg could take 100 to 150 more students, he added. Heller, who said his campus had always had good relations with SPC, has met with Thomas Furlong and other college officials to try to avoid duplication of programs, especially at several of the college centers near downtown, where the USF campus is located.

Some USF St. Petersburg professors also have concerns. One of their vocal leaders, Raymond Arsenault, John Hope Franklin Professor of History, called SPC's Kuttler "a strong leader" but one he fears is leading in the wrong direction. "We are troubled by his persistent empire building," Arsenault said, adding that Kuttler doesn't seem to have any appreciati for what a university is, that it balances research and teaching and should a marketplace of ideas.

USF is not afraid of competition, said Arsenault, who heads the honors program at the St. Petersburg campus. "We hardly ever talk about those three degrees." Rather, he said, he's afraid that a middle-tier of higher education is being created between universities and community colleges without the necessary public debate. It's being done now though the side door, through personal diplomacy, Arsenault said. "It shouldn't depend on whom you know in the state senate" but rather on public dialog, so that people understand the differences between various institutions and the changes being made in those institutions.

James Wattenbarger agreed with Arsenault, pointing out that the state decided some years ago not to create that middle tier. State universities should not ignore the shortage of nurses and teachers, he added. "There is no reason for community colleges to take this on. It sounds like rationalization more than anything else."

Last year, three other Florida community colleges asked the state to allow them to offer several baccalaureate degrees. Chipola Junior College in Marianna, a rural area in the Florida panhandle (nursing, secondary education and business administration); Edison Community College in Fort Myers (public services management and computer technology); and giant Miami-Dade Community College (several education degrees).

The Council for Education Policy, Research and Improvement-formerly the Florida Postsecondary Education Planning Commission-advised against approving these degree programs. William B. Proctor, the agency's executive director, said, for example, that existing teacher education programs in the Miami area had capacity that should be used. But the Florida Board of Education, the decision-making agency, voted in May 2002 to allow Miami-Dade to offer bachelor's degrees in secondary and special education, because it felt the need for teachers in its area was so great. Edison was encouraged to work with Florida Gulf Coast University in Fort Myers, and Chipola with Florida State University in Tallahassee and other schools for the degrees they sought.

Florida State University and Chipola decided that FSU would offer the nursing and business degrees at Chipola's campus, and Chipola would give the secondary education degree. Chipola is the only postsecondary education institution in a large rural district of northwest Florida, said Kitty Myers, dean of baccalaureate and university center programs. More than half of Chipola's graduates do not continue their education because financial, family or job constraints prevent them from commuting or moving to a university, Myers added.

Chipola will offer the secondary education degree with majors in math, biology, chemistry and physics in fall 2003. Myers said that the bachelor's degree nursing program, previously offered entirely online, has been strengthened this year because two FSU faculty now come to Chipola to work with the students, who previously had had little contact with faculty and no mentoring.

Myers, herself a math professor with a Ph.D. from Florida State, hopes to dispel "that snobbery or disdain people have for programs at community colleges. Community colleges should be able to show that they have good programs. You can't recreate a university, nor should you want to," she added. "But you can create one program that's the same as at a university-in some ways better because you have smaller classes."

Miami-Dade will offer degrees in exceptional student education and secondary math and science education starting next August. It hopes to increase the number of teachers who are African American, Hispanic or other minorities, said Leslie Roberts, director of the School of Education.

This year Edison Community College and Florida Gulf Coast University are collaborating so that students can take courses toward public services management and computer technology baccalaureate degrees on Edison's campus. The public services management course aims at providing advancement opportunities for people in law enforcement, firefighters and those in other public safety fields.

Shri Goyal is dean of the new technology management bachelor's degree program at St. Petersburg College.

Elsewhere, some community colleges, like St. Petersburg, changed their names once they started offering bachelor's degrees. Among them is Great Basin College in Elko, Nevada, the northeastern part of the state and far from any universities. It graduated its first class of 18 elementary education majors with baccalaureate degrees in May 2001 and another 15 last May. Great Basin now also offers bachelor's degrees in integrative and professional studies (which Betty Elliott, vice president for academic affairs, describes as a multidisciplinary field similar to liberal arts) and in applied science. In that area, students who have associate's degrees in technical fields that allow them to work in the mining industry return to classes to learn management and human relations skills.

The University of Arkansas-Fort Smith illustrates another way a community college can evolve. As Westark Community College, the school established a center in 1989 through which the University of Arkansas, Arkansas State

University and several others offered baccalaureate degrees in such fields as early childhood education and computer science. By 1998, the college started its own bachelor's degree program in manufacturing management to meet a local economic need, said chancellor Joel Stubblefield. The school, which merged with the University of Arkansas in January 2002, still offers one-year technical certificates and associate's degrees.

"Part of our merger agreement was that we don't throw out what we've done well at the two-year level. We are not trying to do everything A to Z," Stubblefield said, adding: "Mission creep would be a mistake for our school."

There is even a Community College Baccalaureate Association now, headquartered in Fort Myers, Florida. Established in 1999, it currently has about 80 members, most of them community colleges. CCBA's president, Edison Community College president Kenneth Walker, said the group believes that by offering bachelor's degrees, community colleges can address the three major issues that face higher education today: demand, access and cost.

Former Miami-Dade Community College president Robert McCabe sees both the downside and the upside in this debate. The downside is that the academic side of the house creates the agenda to the detriment of community colleges' role in providing job skills and opportunities for low-income students; the upside is that community colleges have traditionally been "more friendly, interesting and supportive places" for minority students. That is particularly important as states try to train more minorities as teachers, added McCabe, now a senior fellow at the League for Innovation.

"But once you start, what happens if all 28 community college districts (in the state) end up wanting to offer baccalaureates? There are not the resources to do that," McCabe said. "Six or seven in the state would probably be enough."

Former Los Angeles Times editorial writer Kay Mills is the author of four books, including one on the federal Head Start program.

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